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ABSTRACT

Many second language teachers in the People's Republic of China, upon encountering the communicative approach, reject it as both unworkable and unnecessary in China, where traditional instruction produces the expected results. However, the educational system is such that students who get to the university are highly motivated and talented, but the demand for larger numbers to be trained in foreign languages may require other approaches, and the kind of English taught traditionally may not be appropriate for contemporary society. The strengths of the traditional approach can be used to support the communicative approach by: (1) using the traditional study scheme of preview, practice, and review but changing the content of each stage; (2) using traditional procedures but changing the content or manner of instruction, such as substituting a lexicon or thesaurus for a dictionary in vocabulary memorization exercises; and (3) using students to teach each other. Changes occurring in the Chinese educational system, such as new teaching materials, testing requirements, the influence of graduate students returning from overseas training, and new advanced teacher training courses, give hope of reconciling seemingly irreconcilable differences in instructional approach. (MSE)

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ON CHALK AND CHEESE, BABIES AND BATHWATER AND SQUARED CIRCLES: CAN TRADITIONAL AND COMMUNICATIVE APPROACHES BE RECONCILED?

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In recent years there has been much discussion about the difficulty of relating communicative theory to classroom methodology and materials. But relatively little attention has been paid to the practicability of implementing any kind of communicative teaching in traditional contexts.

It is all too easy for the aware, conference-going part of our profession to forget that at least 90% of the contexts for teaching ESL/EFL in the world are of a non-innovatory, traditional type. We are a tiny minority. The vast majority of teachers of English throughout the world are either ignorant of or unconcerned by the issues which so inflame us.

If we have a serious commitment to effecting change, however, we cannot afford to ignore this silent majority. Hence this paper, which will be no more than a tentative exploration, based upon my experiences in the People's Republic of China. It is therefore focused on one reality: the PRC. I leave it to readers to decide how generalizable this reality is to their own realities.

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Communicative

Communicative approaches are aimed at developing the *communicative* as opposed to the purely *linguistic* competence of learners. In this first section I shall try to explain the terms "communicative competence" and "communicative teaching," to explore what communicative teaching implies in terms of classroom activities, methods and materials, to compare it with approaches currently in use in China, and to examine the possible advantages and disadvantages of adopting such an approach.

What is communicative competence? There is now fairly broad agreement that communicative competence is made up of four major strands: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence (Canale and Swain 1980).

It is clear that what is meant by grammatical competence is the mastery of the language code. "Such competence focuses directly on the knowledge and skill required to understand and express accurately the literal meaning of utterances" (Canale 1983: 7). It is this type of competence which much classroom teaching seeks to promote.

Sociolinguistic competence involves the ability to produce and understand utterances which are *appropriate* in terms of the context in which they are uttered. This necessarily involves a sensitivity to factors such as stature, status, role, attitude, purpose, degree of formality, social convention and so on. Here are three instances of inappropriate though perfectly well-formed utterances:

> "Sit *down* please!" (Spoken to a distinguished guest – but with the intonation pattern reserved for commands.)
>
> "How old are you?" (Asked of a middle-aged foreign professor one is meeting for the first time.)
>
> "Why has your face gone red?" (Asked of someone who has just been embarrassed by an insensitive personal question.)

Many of the communication failures experienced by learners of a foreign language have their origin in a lack of sociolinguistic competence.

Discourse competence concerns the ability to combine meanings with unified and acceptable spoken or written texts in different genres. (Genre covers the type of text involved: narrative, argumentative, scientific report, newspaper article, news broadcast, casual conversation etc.) At first sight this might seem to be included under grammatical or sociolinguistic competence. But Widdowson's example should illustrate the difference:

> Speaker A: What did the rain do?
>
> Speaker B: The crops were destroyed by the rain (1978:2).

The reply is grammatically and sociolinguistically acceptable, but in discourse terms it simply "doesn't fit." ("It destroyed the crops" obviously would fit.) Failures in discourse competence have recently been interestingly and pertinently ana-

lyzed in the compositions of Chinese undergraduate students (Guo Jian Sheng 1983).

Strategic competence relates to the verbal and non-verbal strategies which learners may need to use either to compensate for breakdowns in communication or to enhance the effectiveness of communication. Under the former, one thinks of the use of hesitation fillers such as "um," "you know," etc. Paraphrase also plays a major role. (e.g. If one does not know the word for "book mark," it can be referred to as "the thing you put in a book to keep your place".) So also do catch-all words such as "thingummy," whatsitsname," etc. (Such features are extensively discussed in Faerch and Kasper 1983.) Given that few if any learners of a foreign language ever learn it perfectly, the importance of these "repair strategies" should be self-evident.

What are the characteristics of communicative approaches? Minimally they will have the following characteristics:

> Concentration on use and appropriateness rather than simply on language form (i.e. meaning as well as grammar).
>
> A tendency to favor fluency-focused rather than simply accuracy-focused activities (Maley 1982).
>
> An attention to communication tasks to be achieved *through* the language rather than simply exercises *on* the language.
>
> An emphasis on student initiative and interaction, rather than simply on teacher-centered direction.
>
> A sensitivity to learners' differences rather than a "lockstep" approach (in which all students proceed through the same materials at the same pace).
>
> An awareness of variation in language use rather than simply attention to the language (i.e. recognition that there is not *one* English but many Englishes).
>
> (Trudgill and Hannah 1982)

What are the implications for teaching? If the factors previously mentioned are to be implemented, there are certain inevitable consequences for the organization and management of the teaching/learning process:

> Teachers' roles will change. They can no longer be regarded as possessing sacrosanct knowledge, which they dispense in daily doses to their docile flock. Instead they will need to set up tasks and activities in which the learners play the major overt role. It is then their job to monitor these activities and to modify and adjust them as time goes by. This implies a much less spectacular, and at the same time much less secure, position.

The learners' roles will change correspondingly. They will no longer find it is enough to follow the lesson passively, but will need to involve themselves as real people in the activities they are asked to undertake both inside and outside the classroom. This gives them at one and the same time more freedom—and more responsibility.

The teaching materials will need to reflect the side range of uses of the language. Almost inevitably there will be a preponderance of authentic over simplified materials.

The techniques applied to those materials will be *task-oriented* rather than exercise-centered. It will be common to find students listening to or reading for information which they then discuss before formulating decisions or solutions in spoken or written form. In other words, the skills will be integrated rather than isolated. It will be rare to find students given a listening or reading text in isolation and asked to answer questions on it for no apparent reason.

The classroom procedures adopted will favor *inter*action among students. This will have implications for the layout of the class-room. (Straight rows of chairs and desks are good for order but bad for communication). There will be an emphasis on work in pairs and small groups. Much work may be founded on the exchange of information between groups. (For a full discussion of these implications see Candlin 1983.)

How does this model compare with current practice in China? Most teaching in China could be labelled "grammar-translation," "direct method" or "structuro-audio-lingual." For practical purposes it makes little difference what we call it. What characterizes all the above labels is that they:

Focus very strongly on the language as language (not as use). The so-called Intensive Reading class is a prime example of this, where the text is removed from its total context of meaning and examined as an object for analysis.

As a corollary, emphasize the memorization of vocabulary and the internalization of rules (many of which do not bear scrutiny!) at the expense of appropriateness and use.

Restrict the quantity and variety of language to which students are exposed.

Offer very few opportunities for real communication among students.

Rely very heavily on strong teacher control, and apportion a major part of the total talking time to the teacher.

Advantages and disadvantages of the communicative approaches

The main advantages of such approaches would seem to be that:

They are more likely to produce the four kinds of competence previously outlined above than more purely language-centered approaches.

They are more immediately relevant since they offer the learner the opportunity of *using* the language for his own purposes earlier than do other approaches.

To this extent, they are more motivating, and students are likely to put more effort into them.

They are less wasteful of time and effort than approaches which attempt to teach the *whole* language system, since they teach only what is relevant and necessary.

In the long term, they equip the learners with the appropriate skills for tackling the language in the real world, since the approach is based on a close-approximation to such uses.

They do, however, have a number of potential disadvantages, namely that:

They make greater demands upon the professional training and competence of the teachers. Teacher withdrawal is not the same thing as inactivity. In terms of preparation and sheer professional skill in knowing when and how to intervene productively, they demand very much more energy and adaptability from the teacher. The teacher also needs to be more confidently competent in the foreign language.

They do not offer the teacher the security of *the* textbook. Whereas, with more traditional approaches, it is sufficient for the teacher to follow the prescription offered by the text-book, here it is necessary for him to select, adapt and invent the materials he uses.

They may perplex students used to other approaches, at least in the initial stages.

They are more difficult to evaluate than the other approaches referred to. Whereas it is relatively easy to test whether a student has "mastered" the present perfect, it is less easy to evaluate his competence in solving a problem, issuing an invitation, negotiating a successful agreement.

Because they appear to go against traditional practice, they tend to meet with opposition, especially from older teachers and learners. (See below CHANGE).

Chinese Students: Chinese Teachers

Given that the purpose of this paper is to explore the feasibility of integrating communicative approaches in the China context, it is clearly necessary to look carefully at the characteristics both of Chinese students and teachers.

The most important factor in changes of any kind is the human factor. But it is precisely this factor which it is most difficult to affect. It is sensible, therefore, to examine both the existing strengths and weaknesses, in the hope of turning to good effect the former, and palliating the latter.

1. *Chinese Students:*

From the point of view of an outsider, Chinese students seem to enjoy the following considerable advantages:

> They are, in general, extremely highly motivated.
>
> They are both industrious to the point of excess, and punctilious in the execution of work requested from them.
>
> They have very good, well-trained memories.
>
> They are accustomed to organizing themselves in groups to work co-operatively for discussion or other purposes.
>
> They have a great capacity for working on their own (which is not the same as working independently!)

There are, however, some disadvantages, namely:

> They tend to demand very firm leadership from their teachers and to expect to be told exactly what to do at every step of the way.
>
> They are mesmerized by accuracy. This leads them to memorize rules which are of little or no use when engaging communicatively in the language. They commit to memory long lists of abstruse words and idioms, many of which they will never need to use, and most of which they would be incapable of using appropriately in any case.
>
> They are insecure in situations demanding fluency (which is presumably why they seek refuge in accuracy)
>
> (Wood 1982)

2. *Chinese Teachers:*

Again from an outsider's viewpoint, the major advantages would seem to be that Chinese teachers:

Care about their students, and go to a great deal of trouble on their behalf, including individual coaching where the need arises.

Are extremely conscientious in their preparation of lessons.

Are usually intensely interested in the subject they teach and are constantly looking for ways of improving their performance.

Are used to working co-operatively with colleagues in the preparation of classes, and to meeting regularly to discuss teaching problems.

On the negative side of the balance sheet there are the following disadvantages however:

They are strongly oriented towards Accuracy teaching, with a heavy emphasis on grammar and vocabulary learning.

They tend to be authoritarian in the classroom. That is, nothing happens in the classroom which is not initiated and controlled by the teacher.

They are frequently insecure about their use of the language they are teaching. Paradoxically this often leads to extremely dogmatic views on language and the way it should be taught.

It frequently also leads to a reluctance to share new ideas, books or techniques.

It may also, in part, be responsible for a conservatism with regard to new approaches. However, this may also be due to the fact that, at the present time, there is little incentive to change. Routine is comforting, if dull. Change involves discomfort, though it may sometimes be exhilarating.

Why Change?

There are three good reasons, possibly more, why change is desirable. First, in historical terms, it happens anyway. Thomas Kuhn (1962), in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* postulates periods of great stability when a given discipline subscribes to a given orthodoxy in learning and practice. (This he calls a paradigm.) But inevitably there comes a time when unorthodox thinkers challenge the reigning paradigm, and establish another in its place. There is little doubt that such a paradigm change has been going on in TEFL over the past 10 years or so. Inevitably it will gain ground.

Second, without change, or at least the possibility of change, any discipline will languish. Procedures, methods, materials, which at their inception were useful and interesting, if repeated indefinitely without change, rapidly degenerate into sterile routines.

Third, the purposes for which people learn foreign languages change as external circumstances change. For many years in China, a purely linguistic, scholas-

tic approach to foreign languages was justifiable on the grounds that few if any people actually needed to use these languages for real communication. In the process of opening to the outside world, a need for a functional command of English in the fields of industry, science and technology, commerce, tourism and so on has been created. Such a need cannot be satisfied without a corresponding change in the methodology of teaching foreign languages.

Many Chinese teachers, when they encounter communicative teaching ideas for the first time, express polite interest but object that such ideas would never work in China, and, in any case, why introduce them when the present system manifestly produces such good results. A full answer to this objection has been given elsewhere by Thomas Scovel (1983). The brief reply runs somewhat thus: with the highly competitive selective process operating in China, only a very small proportion of students even get to university. Those who do are the very best, and are so motivated and intelligent that almost any method would work. However, increasingly, there is a demand for larger numbers to be trained in foreign languages, and a proportion of these may be less highly gifted. Moreover, although the present system does produce good results, in that it succeeds in teaching a kind of English, the indications are that this may not be an appropriate kind for the needs of contemporary society. I would hold, therefore, that change is not only inevitable but also desirable.

Is It Feasible?

Allowing that change of some sort is inevitable, and that changes towards a more communicative approach are desirable, we are still left with the problem of feasibility. Can it be done? And if so, how?

I have suggested above that one avenue of approach is to turn to advantage the strengths already inherent in the present system. The following is an admittedly very tentative list of possible initiatory moves which might be incorporated into the present framework without bringing it down.

1. Utilize the traditional study scheme of "Yuxi, lianxi, fuxi" (preview, practice, review) but change the content of each stage.

At present what seems to happen is that students prepare (yuxi) each lesson, then go over it in class (lianxi) and then review it again (fuxi) later. I would contend that this leads to boredom. By the time the students get to the class, they have usually committed the lesson to memory anyway, so they simply have to undergo a repetition of what they already "know." They then go on to ram it in yet again as revision.

With minor adjustments, this could be modified into the three F's: Framing, Focusing and Follow-up. In the Framing stage, students would study, and if they felt like it, memorize the unit of material from the textbook. The Focusing stage would take place in the classroom. In this stage the focus would be on Fluency, that is, on using the material already studied. But this would not necessarily mean using exactly the same material. A parallel form would be of more value both for motivation and for generalizing purposes. The follow-up stage would involve students in some self-study work related to, but not the same as, the work done in class.

Let us take a simple example. In textbook X there is a unit/lesson on the expression of future time. It follows the familiar pattern, starting with dialogue

carefully constructed to include examples of shall/will, going to, present continuous and present simple used for future time. This is followed by some substitution exercises, vocabulary lists and grammatical explanation. In the Framing stage (out of class) students would be asked to study this.

In the Focusing stage the teacher might decide to concentrate on one aspect of future expression, perhaps the future of intention (going to) or of previous arrangement (present continuous). Each student might be asked to write down on a sheet of paper ten things he intends to do in the next 24 hours, and ten things which have been arranged to happen during that period of time. Students then work with a partner asking questions designed to discover what the other person has written down. (The practice could be made more formal by imposing a fixed pattern, e.g. "I'm *going to* practice because *we're giving* a concert tonight" but this need not be done unless students are very uncertain of themselves.)

If there is time, students could do the following problem-solving activity. They divide into four or five teams. Each team is given, at random, an equal number of slips of paper. On some of them there are *going to* sentences, on others *-ing* sentences. (e.g. "I'm going to type the invitations." or "We're organizing a competion." Each team has to try and build up matching pairs of sentences by sending representatives to other groups to find out what they have and to exchange slips with them. This negotiation has to be done in English.

In the follow-up stage students are given an assignment to do in pairs. This might involve them in skimming through a number of magazine articles to find examples of the forms they have been studying (*going to* and *-ing* for future time). They have to write out all the sentences which contain their examples. From this they try to formulate a generalization about why each form is used when it is. If they cannot formulate a rule, they should still be able to write out questions which occurred to them while trying to do so.

2. Use traditional procedures but change the content or the manner. Here are two brief examples of ways in which this might be done:

(a) Given that students are accustomed to the memorization of vocabulary, organize work which enables them to continue doing so, but ensure that the content is useful—not simply abstruse, learned or esoteric. One way of doing this would be to set work on a semantic area using a thesaurus/lexicon rather than a dictionary (McArthur 1981). They might take a field of meaning like *taste*. Having checked on the items in the lexicon, they could be asked, in pairs, to construct sentences using the items appropriately. This could be followed up by an extract from a cookery book or a book about food where they would re-check the usage of the terms. An alternative way could be to take a word, for example *memory*, and ask each student to write down ten words associated with it. After comparing notes in groups, students could cross-check their results in the lexicon.

(b) Take the hoary procedure of intensive reading and give it a twist. Students in pairs could be given a passage to read out of class. No questions would be set. Instead, each pair would have to decide upon which points of grammar or vocabulary they would choose to highlight. They would then write out the questions or exercises associated with these points. In class, pairs would exchange their texts and questions with

other pairs. They would then try to answer the questions. It is likely that at this stage a number of disagreements would arise about the clarity of the questions, the importance of the language points chosen and so on. These would then be discussed by the pairs concerned in groups of four. (A logical development from this is for groups of students to be assigned a topic which they prepare to teach the class.)

3. Use students to teach each other. This has been described in some detail elsewhere (Rodgers 1983). In the China context it would entail assigning each first year student to a third year *tutor* who would remain with him to the end of his second year. If carried out over a period of time, each student would spend the first two years at college being helped by a senior student, and then act as a tutor to a junior for the two senior years.

In order for this to work well, time has to be set aside for working together and well-defined tasks must be set. With this proviso, it has already worked well elsewhere in the world. It gives both students opportunities for the *real* communication we hear so much about. Moreover it does not perturb the normal pattern of classroom teaching, since it can be conducted in self-study time.

Space does not permit the detailed description of other possible techniques, but readers will readily see the possibilities arising from students keeping a diary in English, being set a group project (e.g. compiling an anthology in English), or setting up self-access rooms (Hayes 1978). The key feature of all the above suggestions is that they utilize the strengths of Chinese students and teachers, without upsetting the hallowed patterns of traditional practices.

Conclusion

Our attitudes towards change are ambivalent. On the one hand, we know that there is "nothing new under the sun" (Kelly 1969). On the other, we know, as Heraclitus says that, "you cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters are continually flowing in." What is needed is a sense of perspective. When our eye is an inch away, the molehill takes on the proportions of a mountain. Only by distancing ourselves do we see it in proportion.

So it is with change. People need time to distance themselves from it and see it in its true perspective. In this way it can be understood and accepted, and the threat it seemed to be retreats.

At present there are encouraging signs that such a process is taking place. Language teaching materials are familiarizing students with alternative ways of teaching and learning. The success of "Follow Me" testifies to this. But there will also shortly be a new generation of teaching materials. For example, the revised edition of the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute and Shanghai Foreign Languages Institute text books, and the new course published by the Guangzhou Foreign Languages Institute (Li Xiaoju 1983) will also soon be joined by the new television university beginners' course. Recent changes in the language testing requirements after two years of study also point in the same direction. And syllabus revision is currently under way. All this could be described as change from the top down.

But it has been recognized that change from the bottom up is also necessary. In this regard there is great potential in the many Chinese post-graduate scholars recently returned from training overseas. As they assume the responsibilities which will surely fall to them, they will exercise considerable influence for pedagogical change. Perhaps even more important will be the advanced teacher training courses currently being set up by the Ministry of Education. Teacher training is clearly the key to future development, and in this way teachers will be given the confidence to embark upon the uncertain waters of experimentation.

Perhaps then there is hope of reconciling the apparently irreconcilable. The differences are not as absolute as those between chalk and cheese, with flexibility of approach the circle can be squared. Meantime, as proponents of change, we need to be wary of throwing out the valued baby with the worthless bathwater.

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